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ABSTRACT

Identification with academics, or the extent to which academic is central to self-concept, has been linked to academic outcomes conceptually and empirically, at least in samples of white college students. However, Claude Steele's Stereotype Threat Hypothesis (1997) proposes something of a racial paradox, by which the most identified students of color might be most at risk for poor academic outcomes. The goal of this study was to test this racial paradox as it relates to identification with academics. High school students were followed for 2 years, with a total of 131 students from whom there were complete data. Simple main effects of identification with academics were observed, with increasing identification associated with higher grades, lower absenteeism, and fewer behavioral referrals. However, the racial paradox was evident in dropout rates. White students became less likely to withdraw as identification increased, but students of color became more likely to withdraw. Taken in the context of previous research, this work holds significant implications for dropout prevention. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Identification with academics, academic outcomes, and withdrawal from school in high school students: Is there a racial paradox?

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Identification with academics, or the extent to which academics is central to the self-concept, has been linked to academic outcomes conceptually and empirically (e.g., Osborne, 1997), at least in samples of White college students. However, Claude Steele's (1997) Stereotype Threat hypothesis proposes something of a racial paradox, whereby the most identified students of color might be most at risk for poor academic outcomes.

The goal of this study was to test this racial paradox as it relates to identification with academics. High school students were followed for two years. Simple main effects of identification with academics were observed, with increasing identification associated with higher grades, lower absenteeism, and fewer behavioral referrals. However, the racial paradox was evident in dropout rates. White students became less likely to withdraw as identification increased, but students of color became more likely to withdraw. Taken in the context of Ogbu's (e.g., 1992) and Fordham's (e.g., 1988) work, this research holds significant implications for dropout prevention.

The concept of "identification" with a domain goes back at least to William James (James, 1890/1981), who argued that one must choose a "self" on which that individual "must stake his salvation" (James, 1892/1968). In other words, of all possible selves one can imagine, James argued that most of these selves are largely irrelevant to our self-conceptions, and that only a few possible selves (such as the scholar, the champion chess player, the renowned pianist) can truly be central and important to the self.

The concept of identification with a domain is either implicitly or explicitly discussed in many self theories. For example, the Symbolic Interactionist view of the self posits that people receive feedback from their environment, that this feedback, if attended to, is perceived and if deemed accurate or valid is incorporated into the self-concept. Further, if that facet of the self-concept is viewed as central, or important (and thus, an individual is *identified* with that domain), then the changes in the self-concept will affect an individual's self-esteem. If an individual does not value that domain, does not view that domain as important to the self (and thus is considered disidentified regarding that domain), then feedback in that domain will ultimately have little effect on that individual's self-esteem. Note that this perspective is not the only one that includes the notion that different areas of life can have different levels of relevance to the self (Allport, 1943; Epstein, 1973; Greenwald, 1980; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser, 1988).

As the focus on this paper is identification with academics, an individual is considered identified with academics if that person views academic performance as an important dimension on which the self is evaluated,. On the other hand, if an individual does not value academics as a dimension on which to evaluate the self, that person would be considered disidentified.

The relationship between identification with academics and academic outcomes

A feature of many self theories is that identification with a domain not only varies across individuals, but within individuals over time. Individuals seem to be extremely facile in their ability to alter which domains they perceive as central in order to maintain a certain positivity of self-esteem. Several authors have argued that individuals are particularly likely to selectively devalue domains for which their group, or they personally, fare poorly and selectively value domains for which their group, or they personally, fare relatively well (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Schmader, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1980).

Note that much of the discourse in this area examines this proposition in terms of some outcome influencing the centrality of a domain. However, it is theoretically consistent to argue that the centrality of a domain can also influence performance in that domain (it is likely that both processes operate

circularly and iteratively). In fact, authors such as (Newmann, 1981) and (Finn, 1989) have argued that identification with academics is a necessary condition for learning, thus implying that identification influences learning.

From a self-esteem point of view, it is intuitive to link identification with a domain to increased motivation to succeed in that domain, because an individual's self-esteem is at stake. For example, Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs (1995) argued that individuals are more likely to invest in self esteem building activities due to the fact that high self esteem promotes an increased positive self image while low self esteem typically elicits numerous negative self views and emotions. Following this argument, students who are identified with academics should be more strongly motivated to succeed academically, and persist longer in the face of frustration or failure than those who have disidentified, because their self-esteem is more strongly influenced by academic performance. For these students, good performance should be intrinsically rewarding (higher self-esteem, leading to more positive emotions) while poor performance should be punishing (lower self-esteem, leading to negative emotions). In contrast, students who are not identified with academics should have little intrinsic motivation to succeed in academics because there is little contingency between academic outcomes and self-esteem-- good performance is not intrinsically rewarding, and poor performance is not intrinsically punishing. Therefore, it could be intuitively argued that disidentified students would be at higher risk for academic problems, specifically poor grades and dropping out.

Supporting this argument, identification has been shown to prospectively predict important academic outcomes, such as grades, being placed on academic probation and dismissal for academic cause, being placed on the honor roll or Dean's list (Osborne, 1997). Further, important psychological variables have been shown to be related to identification, such as learning goals, intrinsic valuing of academics, self-regulation, mastery orientation, academic competitiveness, and cognitive processing of course material (Osborne & Rausch, 2001). Other research has shown that identification with other domains (e.g., identification with work) is predictive of performance in that domain (Kanungo, 1979; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977).

Research on withdrawal from school

While grades, achievement test scores, and other measures of academic progress are of concern to researchers, withdrawal from school has been a critical issue for school districts, principals, teachers, parents, and educational researchers for many years. In 1999, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found that approximately 3.8 million 16- through 24-year-olds were neither enrolled in school nor had they earned a high school diploma. The same study went on to report that, while the drop out rate fluctuated throughout the decade of the 1990's, over the past 28 years, there was a gradual pattern of decline that amounted to an average annual percentage change of 0.1 percent per year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). Numerous studies have examined academic performance and withdrawal from school, often from a risk factor or deficit model, often finding factors such as race, gender and socio-economic status culpable (Coleman et al., 1966; Irvine, 1999; Miller, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Unfortunately, if the goal for this line of research is to improve student retention rates, the risk factor and deficit model leaves few avenues, as many of these factors (race, SES, e.g.) are immalleable.

Other research has shown that engagement behaviors (punctuality, preparedness for class, and effort expenditure on academic tasks, and conversely absenteeism, truancy, disruptiveness, and delinquency) relate to withdrawal (Finn & Rock, 1997). Other research (Rausch, Hamilton, & Osborne, unpublished) points to lack of educational goals as a primary predictor of withdrawal. While these lines of inquiry may be more interesting than the socioeconomic perspectives previously discussed, we are still left wondering why certain students exhibit academic engagement behaviors, or have clear and compelling educational goals while others do not. Further, the literature has a tendency to investigate the causes of premature withdrawal from school separately from poor academic performance.

We view both undesirable outcomes as symptoms of the same syndrome – lack of identification with academics. As we argued above, we believe that the centrality of academics to the self is a prime factor in motivating students to achieve, and their ultimate achievement. Thus we argue that, *in general*, all academic outcomes will to some extent be influenced by the individual's level of identification with academics. Those who are more identified will do better overall, those who are disidentified will tend to do worse overall. However, there is some question as to whether identification with academics will be consistently related to more positive academic outcomes for all students. While Osborne (1997) reported that identification with academics was related to a host of academic outcomes, that was with a mostly-White sample. Is it possible that, for some students, identification with

academics might *increase* the chances of poor academic outcomes, or withdrawal?

Are the effects of identification with academics affected by race?

While authors such as (Osborne, 1997, 2001) have argued that identification with academics should be positively related to academic outcomes, including decreased drop-out rates, Claude Steele's (Steele, 1997) Stereotype Threat hypothesis might suggest that this might not hold for members of academically stigmatized groups. Briefly, Steele's stereotype threat hypothesis argues that negative stereotypes about the intellectual or academic ability of certain groups (such as African-American students) can cause higher levels of anxiety in these students than in non-stigmatized students, not only suppressing academic performance, but also making the academic environment aversive. This theory has the potential to explain why students of color tend to under-perform members of other groups (anxiety inhibits optimal cognitive functioning), and also why those students also have higher dropout rates (the only way to escape the aversive environment is to withdraw, either physically or psychologically). One important caveat of this theory is that this only affects students of color who are *identified* with academics. He explicitly proposed that disidentification was one way to escape the increased anxiety and aversive academic environment. According to this perspective, one self-protective way for students of color who are identified with academics to deal with stereotype threat is to withdraw from school. There is a good deal of empirical support for the Stereotype Threat hypothesis in general, applied to many stigmatized groups (two good summaries of this evidence are Major and Schmader, 1998, and Aronson, Quinn, and Spencer, 1998).

Summary and goals of this study

While there are good theoretical arguments for the relationship between identification with academics and positive academic outcomes, there is little empirical evidence relating to this assertion. Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that this relationship may not be universal—according to Stereotype Threat (Steele, 1997), it might be that, for students of color, identification with academics is negatively related to academic outcomes, particularly manifesting in higher dropout rates as these students seek to escape the aversive academic environment.

The goal of this study was to examine these hypotheses in the context of an urban high school setting. Specifically, we propose that: (a) identification with academics will be positively related to general academic outcomes, such as grade point average, (b) identification with academics will be related to variables that could be considered behavioral proxies for motivation, such as absenteeism and behavioral referrals, with more strongly identified students showing less absenteeism and behavioral problems than less strongly identified individuals, and (c) that there will be an interaction between race and identification with academics in predicting withdrawal from school, where increased identification with academics will be associated with lower dropout rates for White students, but higher dropout rates among students of color.

Method

In order to test these hypotheses a prospective longitudinal study was initiated in the summer of 1999. Incoming ninth grade students at a distressed urban high school were asked to complete an identification with academics questionnaire as part of their registration for fall classes. These students were then tracked for two full years in order to obtain academic outcome data.

The school from which this sample of students was drawn was a racially diverse (Caucasian 33%, African American 39%, Asian 3%, Hispanic 10%, Native American 6%) Mid-Western inner city high school. Academically, 24.2% of Seniors took the ACT and those taking it scored below the state-wide average. Over the last decade less than 25% of the graduating class went to either an in-state or out-of-state college while the state average was 59.8%. Of those that went to college 65.6% (state average: 37.5%) were required to take a remedial course in Math, English, Science or Reading. For graduating classes between 1991 and 1993, of the students who went to college only 14.6% graduated.

A total of 131 students from this school had complete data and were included in the final analyses.

Measures

Identification with academics was measured via the School Perceptions Questionnaire (SPQ, (Osborne, 1997) and the Identification with School Questionnaire (Voelkl, 1996). While both of these measures purport to assess identification with academics, the SPQ explicitly claims to measure the centrality of academics to the self (e.g., "Being a good student is important to me," "I feel good about myself when I get good grades," "I want my friends to think of me as a good student"), whereas the ISQ claims to measure belonging (e.g., "I feel comfortable

when I am in school, like I belong there", "Teachers don't care about me") and valuing of school (e.g., "School is important in life","The things we do in class are useless"). All items were measured on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. The SPQ was reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .87. The ISQ was also reliable, with alphas of .75 and .63 for the belonging and valuing subscales, respectively. However, (Voelkl, 1996) suggested use of a total score, which had an alpha of .78. The two scales were highly correlated (r =.76), and did not produce differential results of interest. Thus, the two scales were combined, producing a single Identification with Academics (IA) scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .91. Items were averaged to produce total scores.

Academic outcomes. At the end of each school year school records were examined and the following information on each student was recorded: overall GPA, number of days absent from school, and the number of times a student was referred to the office for a behavioral problem. At the end of the 2000-2001 school year we gathered information that allowed us to determine if students were still enrolled at this high school, whether they had transferred to another school, or whether they had withdrawn and were not currently enrolled in any school.

Race/ ethnicity. Due to relatively low numbers of minority students from different groups participating, minority students from disadvantaged minority groups (Latino, African-American) were grouped together. While this is not desirable methodologically, it was necessary for statistical reasons.

Results

Grades, absenteeism, and behavioral referrals

To examine whether identification with academics (IA) had any effect on grade point average (GPA), simple correlations between identification with academics and GPA for ninth grade and tenth grade were computed (while it would be ideal to have some covariates in these analyses, such as socioeconomic status and prior academic performance, none were available). Results revealed significant correlations between IA and ninth grade GPA ($r = .28, p < .002$) and tenth grade GPA ($r = .25, p < .02$). There were no race or gender interaction effects, nor curvilinear effects, detected.

There were significant correlations between IA and absenteeism in ninth grade ($r = -.21, p < .05$) and absenteeism in tenth grade ($r = -.24, p < .05$). Finally, there were significant relationships between IA and behavioral referrals in ninth grade ($r = -.20, p < .05$) and behavioral referrals in tenth grade ($r = -.21, p < .05$). As with GPA, there were no race or gender interaction effects, and no curvilinear effects detected.

Similar to the findings of (Osborne, 1997), these analyses reveal that higher identification among high school students is related to higher GPA, lower absenteeism, and fewer behavioral referrals. Given the multidetermined nature of these outcomes, these modest correlations are, in our opinion, good evidence that IA does have an influence, as theoretically expected.

Withdrawal from school

As mentioned above, withdrawal prior to completion of high school is a critical outcome. It is also the outcome most likely to show the predicted race by IA interaction, if any outcome is, due to the theoretical arguments Steele presents. To test this hypothesis, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed, predicting complete withdrawal from school (0=no withdrawal, 1=withdrew) from race (0=White, 1=African-American and Latino), identification with academics, and the interaction of race and identification with academics. Previous analyses revealed no curvilinear effects.

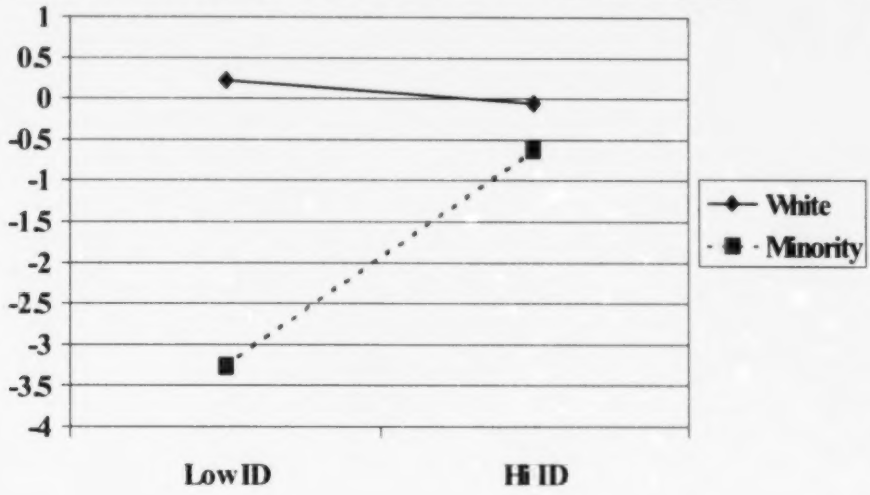
The first step in the model (when race and IA were entered) was significant ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 17.56, p < .0001$). The main effect of race was highly significant (Odds Ratio of 0.11, $p < .0001$), while the main effect of IA was nearly significant (Odds Ratio = 1.55, $p < .06$). The second step, when the interaction was entered, was also significant ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.84, p < .05$). The interaction effect was significant (Odds Ratio =2.63, $p < .05$). The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1.

The results of this analysis support the racial paradox prediction derived from Steele's stereotype threat hypothesis— that increasing IA among White students is associated with decreasing probability of withdrawal, the reverse is true for students of color. As Steele asserted, for these students it is the more highly identified individuals who are more likely to withdraw, as schooling is most aversive for them.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to empirically test the hypothesis that identification with academics is related to academic outcomes in a prospective longitudinal study of inner-city high school students. The analyses revealed that students with higher identification upon entry to high school had higher GPAs, fewer absenteeism, and fewer behavioral

Figure 1
Odds of withdrawal by race and identification with academics



referrals two years later. Although these results were modest in magnitude, all of these outcomes are heavily multiply-determined, and therefore might be more important than the correlations indicate.

Perhaps most interestingly, identification with academics was differentially predictive of early withdrawal from high school (prior to the end of tenth grade) for White students and students of color. Specifically, Claude Steele's Stereotype Threat hypothesis argued that students of color who are identified with academics should be *more likely* to withdraw from school as stronger identification makes schooling more aversive. Our results support this interaction hypothesis. For White students, increasing identification with academics tended to reduce the odds of withdrawal, while for students of color the odds of withdrawal increased as identification with academics increased.

While maddening, it is not surprising that the most dedicated students of color are also most likely to fall victim to early withdrawal. Not only do they contend with, and succeed despite, a stigma of inferiority (as evidenced above in the GPA analyses), but they are also more likely to lose their peer and possibly their community support network. Authors such as Fordham (1988) have observed that students of color, particularly African-American students, must often choose between maintaining their peer and community support networks or their academic success. Thus, not only are they exposed to a more aversive academic environment, but at the same time they lose their support networks that might serve to buffer these stressors.

However, there are ways that this particular "racial paradox" might be dealt with. Claude Steele (Steele, 1997) has talked about the possibility of "inoculating" students of color and other stigmatized students against stereotype threat. John Ogbu has talked of teaching students of color coping strategies specifically designed to allow them to succeed in school without having to give up their racial identities and support networks (Ogbu, 1992, 1997).

Caveats

As with any study, there are several issues that readers need to attend to when interpreting these results. First, we had no measures of background variables, such as socioeconomic status or prior academic achievement. Thus, we were not able to control for background in our analyses. However, it is our opinion that the ability to equate students on SES or prior achievement would have helped to clarify and strengthen these results, not weaken them.

Second, while we mostly discuss the relationship between identification with academics and academic outcomes as a one-way relationship, there is also good reason to assume that this is a circular and iterative relationship. There is research, such as that by Tesser and Campbell (1980) that shows that the centrality of a domain responds readily to outcomes in that domain, just as we argue that outcomes in a domain respond to the centrality of a domain.

Third, race was self-reported. Further, we were forced, because of low numbers, to combine two groups of students who might be qualitatively different. Thus, while Latino and African-American

students tend to share some commonalities, future studies should attempt to tease these groups apart for individual study.

Conclusion

The challenge has historically been for teachers, school administrators, and parents to effectively compel their students and/or children to adjust their perceptions whereby school remains an available option through which they will be able to affirm the self. This is an important concept for several reasons, the most important of which may be that the susceptibility to stereotype threat, as with the concept of domain identification, may be fairly malleable. However, simply telling a student that they have the ability to succeed without clear opportunity or models of success is insufficient. In fact, several theorists have argued that it can only be through independent performance and success that identified minority students are able to overcome the last hurdle put in place by the long history of negative stereotypes. Bandura has argued that performance accomplishments will produce higher, more generalized, and stronger efficacy expectations for individual students (Bandura, 1977, 1982). Steele echoed Bandura's sentiments in his 1988 article by asserting that expected efficacy with regard to a particular behavior is critical to motivating performance. For success to occur in an identified minority student population, there must be a perception that academic success is a viable option and does not carry with it the implied notion of preordained failure that is made explicit in stereotype threat. As this study indicates stigmatized minority groups feel first hand the impact of negative stereotypes and are forced to decide whether or not to risk confirming them or appearing as possibly just the exception to the rule. With few models of success to mirror, the challenge for academically identified minority students can seem a daunting one indeed.

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